

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH COLONEL TOM JAMES, COMMANDER, 4TH BRIGADE COMBAT TEAM SUBJECT: OPERATION MARNE ROUNDUP MODERATOR: CHARLES "JACK" HOLT, CHIEF, NEW MEDIA OPERATIONS, OFFICE OF THE ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF DEFENSE PUBLIC AFFAIRS TIME: 2:00 P.M. EST DATE: TUESDAY, DECEMBER 18, 2007

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COL. JAMES: Yeah. (Laughs.) Hello, how are you? This is Tom James.

MR. HOLT: Yes, sir, Colonel James.

COL. JAMES: Fourth Brigade Commander of the 3rd Infantry Division.

MR. HOLT: Well, Colonel James, welcome to the Blogger's Roundtable. Thanks for being with us this, well, this evening or tonight your time I suppose. Kind of late over there, isn't it?

COL. JAMES: Yes, sir. That's it. It's not too bad. I guess it's about 2206. MR. HOLT: Okay.

Well, do you have an opening statement for us today, sir?

COL. JAMES: I do. And I'd like to just introduce myself. You know, I'm Colonel Tom James. I'm the 4th Brigade commander of the 3rd Infantry Division. And we're conducting operations under Multi-National Division Center, which is Task Force 1, 3rd Infantry Division. That's our headquarters back at Fort Stewart.

Now, they've been here for roughly eight months and we just took over on 1 December and have been executing operations now for over two weeks. And our area of responsibility which is just south of Baghdad, the vicinity of the Iskandariyah area, and we have a good chunk on the northeast portion of the Euphrates River Valley and the Babil province. And we've been conducting operations here now, as I said, for about 16 days.

It's a pretty interesting situation as you look at it across the board. Now, we feel very comfortable with where we are now, but understanding that there's still a whole lot of work to be done. And we've backfilled the 4th Brigade of the 25th Infantry Division out of Fort Richardson, Alaska. And they're now back home I'm sure in the cold weather.

But what has happened is there's been an enormous amount of progress in the central area and especially in our area of operations in North Babil. And just as a short note, the extremists seem to be desperate. Our area of operations is kind of interesting because North Babil is more of a Sunni-extremist area and southern portion of our area which is just the center to center-north part of Babil as well and south of Iskandariyah is more the Shi'a-

based operation. So we have a dynamic there where we have about 85 percent Shi'a and 15 percent Sunni in all of Babil but in our Northern Babil portion that we operate in, it's more of a 65 percent Shi'a and then the rest, 35 percent Sunni. So we have that dynamic of having both groups in our area.

But we see that the population is going no longer intimidated by the extremists. They're tired of being terrorized; they're tired of their families being shot at or killed and they're standing up now and saying, "That's it." And we call this group of folks Concerned Local Citizens that are tired of being terrorized and want to provide information and want to contribute where they can to the security situation to secure their neighborhoods and their families. And that's what we're seeing. And it's -- we're taking advantage of that.

That's one big dynamic that's changed since I was here in 2004. The other one is the Iraqi security forces have really, really grown. The Iraqi army and the Iraqi police in Babil have really come to the forefront and are conducting operations, intelligence-based operations, and have improved significantly and they're really fighting the extremists as well -- and largely looking through a nonsectarian lens which is an interesting dynamic in our area as well. And we have lots of examples of nonsectarian operations where you have Shi'a policemen that are going after Shi'a extremists and not being influenced by governmental or party organizations which is good in our area and we continue to exploit that.

But our mission really is to secure the population -- in our area, that's our number one task. We are to block accelerants that are trying to move into Baghdad with Baghdad being the center of gravity of Iraq. And then defeat sectarian violence to allow the security situation and the population to feel secure and feel free in there for economic and governance to grow. And that's what we've really been focused on.

And what our division has learned -- our, you know, our division being here for seven or eight months and us being relatively new -- we're learning a lot of lessons that they've developed over the past eight months. And one that I'd like to highlight is an operational concept that the division uses, and it's to attack and clear areas where extremists are and then establish a combined patrol base in that area that you've cleared. And that's -- what I mean combined, I mean coalition force, Iraqi army and Iraqi police consolidated effort to show the population that not only have we cleared your area but we're here to stay and we're here to help protect you. And what this does is the population really feels secure and is now standing up and going, okay, we know that you're committed here. Here's some actionable intelligence that starts to flow and then economics and governance starts to grow from the lowest level -- and we call it building local capacity and we've been able to see that in our area.

And then you never give up this terrain. Over time, we will transition it to Iraqi security force, be it in the cities, the Iraqi police, and if it's outside the cities, then the extremists areas, the Iraqi army, but we see that down the road from now.

And we recently -- General Lynch, our division commander -- when a brigade rotates through, typically gives us an operation, a division main effort operation where we get to use all the division enablers and we get to go out and execute an operation against some sort of a threat force -- and in our case, it's the Sunni extremists to our north -- and it enables us to really start working all of those systems and learn from the -- what the division has learned

over eight months. And it allows us to ramp up a lot quicker than other words, just gradually moving in. It's been a good operation for us.

Matter of fact, at the beginning of this month we started Operation Marne Roundup which is a division operation with us as the main effort. And the operation is focused on the defeating al Qaeda in the Euphrates River Valley in the northwest portion of Babil province. And we've estimated that they're about 30 extremists that are terrorizing the population. In certain areas, you know, we've made enormous progress with extremists, especially al Qaeda to where they're not finding the sanctuary within the population that they used to and now they're starting to work their way into the jungle lines of the Euphrates River Valley. And we continue to progressively take that area away from them. And we see them being somewhat desperate at this point.

But in this operation we estimate about 30 extremists, vicinity -- a town called Kidr and the Euphrates River Valley and -- no -- correction, Northwest Babil. And we've conducted offensive actions with the Iraqi security forces over the past several days. We had an intelligence development for about seven days and now we've been in offensive operations for the last three or four and have been extremely successful with this point. And now that we've executed that operation, we feel like we can establish a patrol base, vicinity the town of Kidr (sp) and then the intelligence and economics and governance will grow as we defeat al Qaeda in this area.

And we've been successful with this point, a large part of it being intelligence we've gotten from the local communities and being able to involve Concerned Local Citizens in the areas where we don't have Iraqi security forces yet. And we just combined effort with the Iraqi security forces. And what we've been able to do is establish some blocking positions in the river valley area and then conduct kinetic or lethal strikes with air force and artillery on positions that we've identified as extremists defensive positions and cache points and then we've attacked up the river valley and seized key terrain to establish these patrol bases. And we see that being in places that we want to deny sanctuary for al Qaeda. And this operation that we have successfully attacked and cleared and now we're in the process of holding and building -- we're holding right now by building this patrol base. And then in addition to that, the economics and governance will grow. And just to give you some rough ideas of roll-ups -- in the last five days of our operation, we've found 25 IEDs; we found over 10 caches, we've destroyed eight extremist fighting positions and we've destroyed the 10 caches with our EOD assets and we've employed roughly 80 to 100 Concerned Local Citizens to help secure our lines of operations while we get the Iraqi army and ourselves into this patrol base and then pull the police up once we have the area secure.

So that's in general terms what we've been doing over the last 17 or 18 days. And as we've transitioned into our operating environment, these are the operations that we've executed. You know, we have roughly 3,000 soldiers in Task Force Vanguard, all highly motivated and just -- and never continue to amaze me about how well they're operating out there.

And so that's kind of where we stand right now. So far, a very successful operation but always knowing about 40 percent of our brigade combat team is back for a multiple OIF, whether it be two or three times. So we understand the idea that -- we're positive about this progress because it's really -- based on our third time of being here, it's different now. It seems like it's really starting to hold, the momentum's really building to where we've just got to continue to push it but understanding that there'll be setbacks

along the way as we continue to push. And so I guess that's my opening statement for now.

MR. HOLT: Thank you, sir.

And Andrew, you were first on line, so why don't you get us started?

Q -- (Audio difficulty) -- MR. HOLT: I'm not --

Q -- (Audio difficulty) --

MR. HOLT: Okay, Andrew, you were breaking up there.

Q -- (Audio difficulty) --

COL. JAMES: I don't know if you can relay that?

Q -- (Audio difficulty) --

MR. HOLT: Okay, Andrew, your phone is breaking up really bad and we're not able to catch what -- get the gist of what you're saying.

Q -- (Audio difficulty) --

Q I caught a little bit of that. I think he asked if the Shi'a that are fighting are criminals or religious extremists.

Q Yes, correct.

MR. HOLT: Okay.

COL. JAMES: Yeah, I think you'll see that you've got a combination -- a combination there of Shi'a that are criminals and Shi'a that are extremists, but what'll really define it is Shi'a extremists. And you know, there's not, you know, you've heard the old Jaish al Mahdi or the JAM and there's Badr, and there's -- (inaudible) -- all those religious groups but we don't do that -- we lump it into a Shi'a extremist that is really antigovernment and anti-Iraqi security force establishment and coalition force. And that's what we've worked. And predominantly in the southern portion of our area of operation and what we have seen with the Shi'a piece of this is that the Iraqi security forces, police and as well the Iraqi army have done a great job of containing the Shi'a extremists in the southern portion of Babil. You know, we hope with operations associated with the Shi'a that the predominate offensive action that the coalition forces have been involved in since we've been here have been Sunni extremists to our north but the Babil police and as well the Iraqi army in the South Babil area have been very successful in focusing on that. And it's really just the Shi'a extremists that we're seeing right now -- less the criminals but more the Shi'a extremists.

Q Okay, thank you.

MR. HOLT: Okay.

And Paul.

Q Hi, Colonel. Paul McLeary from Columbia Journalism Review. As far as IEDs and the caches you're finding, I'm just curious what kind of

munitions they are and if they tend to be more homemade munitions or if they're a little more sophisticated or if you think that the weapons that the insurgents are using have been degraded over time.

COL. JAMES: I think they have been degraded over time. We're finding enormous amount of caches, not just in Marne Roundup we've had 10, but as a brigade combat team we've had over 20 and the divisions have had enormous amounts.

But what we're discovering is the artillery rounds, we found a couple that are 125 millimeter artillery rounds. In addition to that there is some HME -- relatively small amount of HME that we have found at this point -- it's mainly artillery shells that are rigged to a pressure plate initiator. And we see the IEDs that are placed in the road and then -- and they're detectable sometimes but then there are pressure plates, smaller IEDs along the shoulders of the road on the flanks of these IEDs so that if you try to bypass, you can run into these. But it's been primarily the older artillery rounds with a rather primitive firehouse pressure plate initiator.

Q Okay. Is this different from what you saw in 2004 when you were there?

COL. JAMES: It is not. I mean, we still had artillery rounds as I recall in 2004 -- I was in Baghdad at that time -- and so we did find the artillery rounds. And, you know, this is all part of Marne Roundup in the north. We still are finding the EFP array to the south in the Shi'a areas -- south of our AO and north of Babil. I think you've seen in the news recently where the Babil police chief, General Qais was -- we believe assassinated by a EFP array. And it's typically associated with the Shi'a extremists to the south. So the EFP is something new that I didn't see in 2004 in our south, but based on this operation in the north, it's primarily a little bit of HME but more just artillery rounds rigged with explosives and C4 and --

Q Thanks, sir.

MR. HOLT: Okay.

And Jarred.

(Cross talk.)

Q Thank you. If you could talk a little bit about -- you mentioned several times the proficiency of the Iraqi security forces. If you could talk a little about what you're seeing on the ground as far as your coming along, as far as the CLCs being brought in, as far as the elite units the Iraqi army being able to step up and take over as we draw down.

COL. JAMES: Right. Absolutely. Well, what I'm seeing with the Iraqi army -- and I'll start with the Iraqi army, then the police, then the CLCs. The Iraqi army has a rank structure of inspirational leaders that understand what we refer to as battle command and can see the situation and can understand the intelligence and the impacts of how to apply force across the battlefield to be much more effective. It's the, what we call "operationalizing the intelligence." Here's what we're seeing based on our collectors and here's how we're applying force to defeat whatever it may be or achieve a tactical task. I'm seeing much more in that level at the division and brigade and battalion levels.

And then what really wins the fight out there obviously is the execution that the battalion and below focus on the companies and the platoons that execute operations. And they're much less static now. They used to be more of checkpoint manners, patrol base manners but now they're out executing offensive action, clearing IEDs themselves and also establishing fire and maneuver which we didn't see in the past. there's progress there with Iraqi army relating to that maneuver.

So And it's more partnering. You know, it's not necessarily -- we train each other, we learn from each other. But it's a partnering effort and they're able execute operations independently much more so now than they were. And I'm speaking in the North Babil terms and what I've seen over the last couple weeks and before that when we were training up to come into the area.

And the Iraqi police -- we have joint security stations where we have three companies and our brigade combat team that are collocated with the Iraqi police. And the Iraqi police are -- in North Babil are Shi'a and Sunni mixes.

We have an example in a place called Tunis of a Shi'a -- correction, a Sunni police chief that's in a Shi'a town and it's still looking through a nonsectarian lens and focused on Iraqi law and executing that law and -- by using warrants and defining, here's why we have to arrest this individual. And we see a lot more of that.

Their techniques for arrest and their techniques for how to track individuals is much better and much more precise as they execute operations and then their police stations and their communications -- there's still some equipment issues. We've still got to get them more equipment. And that's working. And we track that with our Iraqi army and our police counterparts. But police need trucks, they need communication devices -- and they have those but not to the quantity that we need. So we're working that very hard.

They have police academies that are teaching them a lot about how to do the police function and we see that a lot in Babil. And so that has been a very big plus. The way we're using the Concerned Local Citizens is where there are not Iraqi police, Iraqi army, we're using concerned citizens to thicken the lines to help secure the area. So -- and as a general rule, the Iraqi police and the police stations are inside the cities; the Iraqi army are in patrol places outside the cities in the area where extremists try to find sanctuary and they execute offensive operations outside the city.

And then on those avenues or routes that connect those areas is where we've placed the Concerned Local Citizens to help thicken the lines to secure the area and secure the population to allow governance and economics and all the other pieces to grow. And right now we have just under 6,000 Concerned Local Citizens right now in North Babil. And so that has been a great movement and they'll provide us great intelligence. That's the key; they secure our routes to allow us to apply power from the Iraqi army, police and coalition force in the areas where the enemy is. And they secure those lines for the population. And this will allow freedom of maneuver and movement for us.

MR. HOLT: Okay.

Anybody else? Any other questions?

Q I've got a follow up then, if we've got time? MR. HOLT: Okay, sure. Go ahead.

Q Sir, can you talk a little bit then to the training schedule of the Iraqis that you're seeing about -- are the CLCs getting training? Did the Iraqi army -- do they change in and redeploy and go out and train as a battalion or a company or a command -- if you could talk a little bit to that aspect of it?

COL. JAMES: Yes, I can. And what I'd like to do before I go there is follow up on one thing about Concerned Local Citizens. We understand that Concerned Local Citizens eventually have to transition to something else. And what we're doing is we're trying to work Concerned Local Citizens into the Iraqi police. You know, we want to get them into the Iraqi security force so that they're working in an organization controlled and supportive of the government.

And so we're working that very hard and key piece of that is being able to make the gates. The Concerned Local Citizens want to be a part of the Iraqi security force but they don't necessarily want to be in the Iraqi army because that will require them to deploy away from their home. And so they're more apt want to join the Iraqi police. And so we're working hard to work the coalition -- correction, the Concerned Local Citizens into the Iraqi police. And they're fairly successful. We're looking at about probably 20 -- 20 (percent) to 30 percent able to do that.

And one of the distinguishers is whether they can read and write and they can meet the requirements. And so we've got 140 that'll graduate -- Concerned Local Citizens who will graduate the end of this year -- correction, the end of the month in the Iraqi police and will be positioned in police stations near their home to work as police officers.

And so that is a good news story and we continue to try to work that very hard understanding that there'll be some Concerned Local Citizens that won't meet the requirements for police who will try to find other work -- economic, like working at the industrial complex in Iskandariyah or find some other form of work like a public works battalion that can help better the neighborhoods and help clean the neighborhoods and help make it a better place to live. So we're working with all of that.

But back to your question as far as training -- and we're seeing a very dynamic training plan from the units that we work with in North Babil to weapons qualification and to training related to conducting combined operations and maneuver based on intelligence. We're working intelligence very hard and we're working the application of that maneuver out on the streets or in the -- correction, the jungle area or the Euphrates River Valley area as well. We have started something in our AO called -- (inaudible) --, we're going to develop a NCO academy which has been obviously very effective for the coalition force for us and now we want to spread that to the Iraqi security forces, specifically the army. And so here at the -- in January, we'll have our first class where we'll have approximately 80 NCOs from throughout the Iraqi army to come learn about leadership, about counter-IED operations, about use of radios, command and control, weapons qualification, medical training and logistics. We're working real hard to look at the logistic pieces of the Iraqi army. And so we're working training programs there.

And we look as a partnership -- there will be some Iraqi security force NCOs that will be instructors. And we continue to work that dynamic and it's

been successful to this point -- always training that needs to be done and they're working it hard. And then there's still some equipment issues that need to be worked as well. So that's what we've been working.

MR. HOLT: Okay.

Any follow ups?

All right, sir. Colonel Tom James, thank you very much for being with us for the Blogger's Roundtable today. Colonel James, the commander --

COL. JAMES: Yes, sir. Thank you very much.

MR. HOLT: And, sir, do you have any closing thoughts for us -- closing statement?

COL. JAMES: Yeah, I would like to make a couple closing comments. You know, one of the things that amazes me about this whole operation and being back here for several times is the amazing capabilities of our soldiers. Our soldiers never cease to amaze me. They're phenomenal. They're out here and they're executing operations every day.

And it's interesting when you're around a Christmas season and I see it as a season of giving. And what I tell them during this season is there's no greater gift than freedom. And they have committed every day to making Iraq a safer place so that the international community can be safer but more importantly that our homeland can be safer and this won't be a safe haven for terrorists. And they're away from their families and their families are just as phenomenal and supporting them every step of the way. And we appreciate what our country is doing for us to support us here and be behind us.

And it's great to see the progress that has occurred here in Iraq with the Iraqi security forces and the citizens saying that enough's enough, we want a free country for our children to grow up in and be safe. And so that's just the message I want to send.

And thanks for being able to talk to me tonight. MR. HOLT: Thank you, sir, for being with us. And hopefully we can speak again in a few weeks. And Merry Christmas to you, sir, and to your troops.

COL. JAMES: That would be great.

MR. HOLT: Thank you, sir.

COL. JAMES: Thank you.

END.